

A Place In Art History

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*Introduction*²

UPON first meeting Steffen Thomas in March, 1979 I was overwhelmed by the man and by the sheer volume and energy of his work. When viewing and contemplating the works of the early twentieth century German Expressionists, I feel the same intense and simultaneous infusion of philosophy and craft that is so apparent in Thomas' sculpture and painting.

It takes hard work to get to know and understand an artist. This was especially true of Thomas. He was quick, demanding, unpretentious, committed, tough, honest and genuine. He was a man of conviction who did not quibble about insignificance. And he was a troublemaker—a tease who always enjoyed a good laugh, especially at the expense of someone else. His wife Sara would gently admonish him for his behavior, which was never vindictive. With all this, Thomas was the most single-minded artist I had ever encountered. He could be gruff and cantankerous when testing people. If you weren't frightened, you might have been fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of his soul without his ever knowing it.

My fondest memories of Thomas were of the times we spent in his home near Piedmont Park in Atlanta, Georgia, sitting around an informal yet grand mosaic dining table of tile and glass called Break Through to Outer Space, which he made sometime in the 1950s. We would drink red wine, talk exuberantly and philosophize about art and life. While I enjoyed his company too few times, I came to study him, to know him, and to value his friendship and knowledge as an artist and a human being through our many letters and long distance conversations.

At the time I was the young director of a regional art museum that had a growing reputation. My friendship with Thomas was, for me, of historic proportions, akin to those Dr. William R. Valentiner had with the German Expressionist painters Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. Valentiner was the great German art historian of Dutch painting who had come to America to lead the Detroit Institute of Arts as its first director in the 1920s. He knew personally many of the Expressionist artists. And it was he who was primarily responsible for amassing the important collection of German Expressionism for the Institute of Arts during the 20s and 30s. Later, as the first director of the North Carolina Museum of Art, he would donate a number of paintings from his own collection to the museum when its collection was being formed.

During my early years in the profession I was accustomed to dealing with much younger artists whose own histories in the art world were much like my own: brief. Instinctively, this relationship

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² This essay was originally written as a foreword and introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition, STEFFEN THOMAS: The Freedom of the Figure, organized by St. John's Museum of Art in 1983. It has been revised for this presentation.

seemed different from others I had. This was an unusual opportunity. It was the stuff of legend in the art museum world. It gave me a personal and oral history, what the history of art is made of - something meaningful and substantial.

As an artist Thomas was more than a product of his time. He transcended it. He lived and produced art in America for over sixty years. The variety of his work, in medium, style and substance, made the selection of objects for the 1983 exhibition, *STEFFEN THOMAS: The Freedom of the Figure*, an enormous task. Finally, in early 1982, after working on the project for over fourteen months the decision was made not to attempt a retrospective. It seemed more appropriate to narrow the scope of the exhibition, and figurative work was chosen as the theme since it was the classical figure upon which Thomas' early artistic training was based.

The work in that exhibition was a sampling of styles and media representative of Thomas' output since coming to America, with the exception of the bronze, *Laboré* dated 1927-28, for which he was awarded first prize at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich when he was only twenty-one. For every work selected there were several others equal to the task of accurately representing the strongest group of figurative work from the artist's oeuvre. A large portion of the exhibition was devoted to sculpture in bronze, the medium for which Thomas was best known. A number of works in marble, aluminum, and welded copper also were included. Paintings and works on paper were represented by a range of media: oil on canvas, encaustic, sand and oil, asphalt and mixed media on panel, watercolor, lithography, etching, and woodcut.

The earlier attempt to bring Thomas' work to the attention of new audiences necessitated the elimination of a number of works due to object size, fragility, unavailability, and the limitations of touring an exhibition. Other works had become damaged or their whereabouts were unknown. Ultimately, choices were made in the interests of time and space because, quite simply, not everything could be included.

On the other hand, Dr. Janson approached this project with a new perspective and a fresh eye while looking at Thomas' work. Though the number of works in this selection has been reduced by nearly half of the seventy shown in 1983, several significant asphalt panel paintings and mosaics of the first rank have been added, making this selection different in focus and content. Many people who have organized exhibitions understand the complexity of assembling a project with so many objects and tasks. For those of us involved with the selection and presentation of Thomas' work, an appreciation is extended to Anthony Janson and Andrew Hayes, and to the lenders as well who have generously shared their works. All of us have been blessed with a great spirit of cooperation so important for such an undertaking.

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STEFFEN WOLFGANG GEORGE THOMAS was born in Furth, Germany in 1906. Early in his fourteenth year he apprenticed as a stone carver, and demonstrated skill in the expression and production in stone. During the latter part of his apprenticeship and until he was nineteen years old, Thomas studied at the School of Applied Arts in Nuremberg before entering the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. While at the Academy he was awarded “Master” status when he was twenty-one and was given a studio of his own.

In 1928 Thomas came to America at the age of twenty-two, having immigrated long before other Expressionist artists arrived in this country. (The imminent rise of Nazism would cause many artists to flee Germany in the early 1930s.) Thomas had already established himself as a sculptor of note in Germany. However, he came to this country determined to make his way as an artist in a new land, as one may gather from his comments which follow. By his mid-twenties Thomas had become well known in the United States. He had already completed several important monumental commissions, in part because of his desire to make a living from his art as well as his willingness and ability to produce work in a more traditional style, unlike many other of his émigré contemporaries who had come to America but whose reputations and abilities were largely ignored and ultimately forgotten.

Thomas left Germany ten years after the end of World War I, or what had been called The Great War, and five years prior to the Nazis’ rise to power. Fortunately, the timing of his departure was early enough not to have had his outlook tainted and burdened by the bitterness, sadness and guilt of the motherland’s impact and influence on the world, the way it would affect those artists who escaped to America and elsewhere after him. While this resulted in the lack of political edge in Thomas’ imagery, it did not affect his work aesthetically.

In the introduction to his book, *Charcoal Drawings*, published in 1974, Thomas made the following insightful observations about himself.

“I am Welsh by ancestry, German by birth, an American by adoption, and a Southerner by choice. I was born in Furth near Nuremberg, Bavaria, Germany. During my three years’ apprenticeship as stone carver-sculptor, which gave me the basic understanding of the materials and skill of sculpture, I studied first in the evening classes and later as a full student at the School of Applied Arts at Nuremberg. I was fortunate to have two fine artists as professors, Widmer and Rumelin. After several years at Nuremberg, I matriculated at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich, Germany, where I had great tutors, professors Herman Hahn, Joseph Wakerle, and Bernhard Bleeker. During my Munich studies, I was a regular exhibitor at the Glas Palast. I also studied one year of architecture with German Bestlemeier, professor at the Munich Technical School, and anatomy at the University of Munich’s medical school. In the fall of 1928, after finishing my training in Munich, I came to America where I pursued my profession continually and exclusively.

In 1933, I became an American citizen and married Sara Douglass of Atlanta, Georgia. In 1941, we moved to Stone Mountain where we reared our four children. I practiced my art professionally at Stone Mountain, Georgia in my own large studio equipped for stone carving, bronze casting, as well as painting and graphics. All my creativity took place at Stone Mountain, during the years 1940-1971. In 1971, the property was sold, giving way to a housing project. I then moved back to Atlanta where I started out.

During my working years at Stone Mountain, hundreds of people came to visit. Work was all with me and I exhilarated in the freedom of America of which I was a part. I expressed all my feeling of freedom in my art through sketching, charcoal drawing, print making, painting, and sculpting.

All of it came with difficulty because of the forever struggle of making a living for my family. We built our home at Stone Mountain with all helping together. We had a fantastic thing going, which I am sure inspired many of our friends and visitors. I did not always see eye to eye with art directors and politicians. Often I tried to participate in art movements and affairs, and even ran for public office several times, but was always defeated - for which I am thankful, in retrospect.

Once rid of the idea of wanting to shine, I promptly geared all my energy to creative work irrespective of who liked it or not. With this I have found happiness and certainly less trouble.”

Thomas’ formal training was in drawing and sculpture, especially in the classical styles. His early work reflected that training almost entirely. However, by the time of his arrival in Atlanta he was working more abstractly, producing important sculpture in both post-Cubist and Expressionist styles. Thomas was an experimenter. His work is best described as the result of experimentation with materials, and derivations of the classical forms and styles. Two of the finest extant examples of such work in bronze are *Neurosis* of 1929 and *The Lesson in Anatomy* of 1929-31.

At the same time, he continued working in the classical tradition in his commissioned monumental sculptures. But over the years some of his most inventive works, which demonstrated the foundation and training he received in drawing, were the small, gestural, fluid and quickly produced sketches and watercolors he would make to occupy himself in the evenings, and in later years while the television was playing in the background. Typically these works would be made on literally any material close at hand including tracing or writing paper, usually no larger than 8” x 10” (Two such examples are *Walking Circus Horse* and *Study for the Kraus Bull*.) These works indicate his restlessness and support the notion of Thomas as a driven experimenter. Many of the ideas and images formulated in these small works, which would appear later in larger more important works, were an outgrowth of this frenetic activity.

The German Expressionist movement began in 1905 with the founding of *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), and culminated in 1933 with Hitler’s rise to power and the closing of the Bauhaus. During those twenty-eight years there was no unified Expressionist style, yet the search for a vision representing a personal experience was a common denominator for all artists concerned with communicating feelings, ideas, and philosophical notions about the social and psychological condition of man in the early part of the twentieth century. Thomas mentioned the impact these artists had on him. Prior to leaving Germany he had seen many exhibitions “of the one dozen great expressionists... their influence was great, yet I could not completely grasp their importance at the time.”³

During its brief existence from 1905 - 1913, *Die Brücke*, which was founded by Ludwig Kirchner and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff among others, represented not so much an ideology as it did a collective stand against so much of what was going on around them. This group of former architecture students, who were more interested in painting, was influenced by a variety of imagery simultaneously to, yet independently of, other artists in Europe. The Expressionist movement had obvious connections to the Fauves in France (their appearance at the Salon d’Automne in 1905 and their use of color), to Van Gogh (as exemplified by the artist whose obsessive inner drive was exhibited in the vibrancy of his brushwork), to Gauguin (his independence and personal style), to the angularity of the primitive art of Africa and the South Pacific which so influenced the Cubists, and to the writings and philosophies of several late nineteenth century historians, theoreticians and critics. The act of making art was considered in various contexts: as human emotion; as being derived solely from content and idea; as a purely objective science; and as an empathetic reaction of the viewer to the object. One result of the Expressionist movement was to raise the consciousness of man to the world around him. The Nazis failed in their attempts to dissuade others outside Germany from seeing the value and strength in such artistic statements, but they tried to discredit many artists, first by displaying their works in the exhibition *Degenerate Art* in Berlin in 1937, and

³ Thomas made this comment to Andrew Hayes during 1982 when he visited the artist in Atlanta to record conversations in preparation for the 1983 exhibition.

then by destroying thousands of those works not long after. It was prophetic that religious subjects would become popular among Expressionist artists in spite of religious persecution in Nazi Germany.

As the world has changed dramatically in this century, so too, has art. Indeed, the crisis of the modern artist has been the struggle to deal with the objective and the non-objective (recognizable imagery versus abstraction), regardless of whether content was formal or narrative, and whether the abstraction of nature was simply selected organization, or an extension of nature itself. The influential Belgian painter, designer and critic Henry van de Velde's "doctrine of line as an abstract force" greatly influenced the Expressionists, along with other theories about the organization of color. Those influences were apparent in the Expressionist works and in Thomas'. The ever present use of the profile was a significant part of his work and demonstrated the importance he placed on the use of line as an element of art. Thomas often summarized this when making a philosophical statement about his own work: "No silhouette, no art."

Thomas studied the literature of philosophy and mythology, and he drew heavily on that for subject matter and symbol in his art, as in the work *Lao-Tse*, a relatively compact but powerful welded copper sculpture from 1968. This medium was one in which Thomas, ever restless, could work quickly while bypassing the steps required to cast bronze. This piece is the most mature work from the period in that medium because it relates more in form and style to his earlier bronzes. Along with Thomas' formal experiences in art, his study of philosophy and the development of his own strong ideas informed his style.

Visual artists seek universal truths through the manipulation of the plastic arts. Ultimately, if art is to have a real value or lasting quality, it must have meaning across cultures over long periods of time, and must deal with universal forms and meanings. Thomas believed it was the artist's responsibility to translate impressions of those universal forms and meanings to the observer by simplifying them. He used those symbols and forms in his works, and often it is those symbols and forms that convey meaning to the viewer instinctively, even when the literal meaning is difficult to understand.

Thomas used abstraction as a means of simplifying his expression. To him the detail of nature or a natural form, such as a face or a landscape, detracted from the intended impression and had to be deleted. Thus, even though he relied heavily on abstraction to reduce and simplify detail, the natural (objective, recognizable) form was almost always present in silhouette. And while he recognized the importance of the elements of nature in his work, Thomas' somewhat arbitrary use of color, texture, and simplified forms in his paintings, and his personal interpretation of nature placed him among those working in the German Expressionist style, somewhere between members of *Die Brücke* and *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) stylistically and philosophically.

Sculpture was the medium in which Thomas excelled and produced his most important work. It should be noted that all his sculpture, bronze and otherwise (excluding monumental works such as the Alabama Memorial at Vicksburg National Military Park, Mississippi) were literally produced by Thomas as one-of-a-kind works (only later in his life did he cast several limited numbered editions using commercial foundries). Each step of the process, including casting, chasing (grinding and finishing) and patination (surface finishes) was executed by Thomas himself. *Neurosis* and *The Lesson in Anatomy* are extraordinary examples of works cast in bronze precisely because of the comprehensiveness of their execution, from conception through casting and patination. This is especially true when one recognizes the sophistication of such works completed so shortly after the much more realistic *Laboré* of one year earlier. That there is only one of each of these works of art in existence is particularly noteworthy considering how acceptable it has become for artists to make large editions of their work.

Beginning in the 1970s, after moving away from his larger studio in Stone Mountain, Thomas continued to produce small editions of prints and began making several editions of small scale bronzes, consisting of six works or less. Though he was nearly seventy, he continued to cast and finish each work himself.

The influence of his training in sculpture and modeling the human form allowed Thomas to concentrate on articulating the human head as a subject and major theme in his work, especially in painting. Thomas produced an extraordinary series of modestly scaled paintings on panel from the late 1930s through the early 1950s using the media encaustic, and sand and oil. These are distinctly marked by the influence of his education in Munich, and most likely by having seen exhibitions by the Expressionists prior to his leaving Germany. Works such as the muse in *Head of a Woman*, the three quarter view of *Woman with a Rose*, and the uneven eyes in *The Little King* illustrate his investigation of the head as a subject through the manipulation of materials and the influences of philosophy and literature. These compact paintings are carefully composed yet energetic, and rich in subtlety, texture and color.

Particularly apparent in Thomas' paintings and noticeable in his sculpture as well are the regimentation with the profile and the element of scale. These are the direct result of a rigorous foundation in drawing and Thomas' work in sculpture. The profile becomes the natural element that holds seemingly undisciplined looking works together compositionally. These compressed or closed compositions are indicated by the use of the shrine, the painted window or in some cases, a carved frame, and reiterate Thomas' need for security. Scale is subtly suggested in other works such as the watercolor *Study for Trilon* and the bronze maquette for *Trilon*, where the image takes up nearly the entire surface of the sheet or the sculpture. These works are quite forceful, implying the scale of the proposed sculpture. The opposite effect occurs in *Meditating Figure*, a marble sculpture where monumentality is suggested in spite of the small size.

Over the years, Thomas made elaborate frames for many of his most complicated two-dimensional works, the mosaics and asphalt paintings in particular. These were usually carved and occasionally incorporated mosaic borders. This activity was an extension of making sculpture but was intertwined with his constant need to experiment. For example, aside from the images that appear in the asphalt paintings, they represent Thomas' endless fascination with the manipulation of materials. He would begin with any of the media he used in these paintings. At some point, and there was no predicting when, he would lay down a sheet of polyester on top of the already partially painted surface and continue to add paint and asphalt over that. Based on his conversations with Thomas, Andrew Hayes has said, "Steffen just kept messing with it." Indeed so, and with extraordinary results.

Early on in the movement's history, the German Expressionists revived printmaking as an important medium. Thomas was not actually trained in printmaking, but he was fascinated with the process and experimented with it endlessly over the years. The figural imagery in his woodcuts and lithographs reveal a sculptural quality and angularity reminiscent of Gothic woodcarvings, for which Thomas maintained a special fondness. This is quite consistent with his Expressionist counterparts in Germany, who had been influenced by the artist's guilds of the Middle Ages and who had been instrumental in reviving printmaking as an important art form in Europe in the twentieth century. Perhaps the experimental artistic climate of Munich during Thomas' years of study led to his using different materials and media while searching for his own style.

Originally, the idea of making multiples, graphic prints for instance, resulted from the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, and peoples' desire to own identical but smaller, less expensive versions of the same painted images that had become popular. These works, sometimes produced by the artist (i.e., Dürer) and sometimes by artisans working under the direction of the artist, were essentially copies as engravings or etchings because they attempted to reproduce the images as precisely as possible. These prints were works of art in and of themselves, produced by hand and pulled in those media on printmaking presses. Thomas understood the axiom, "perfection is imperfection." Art was never intended to look as if it had been produced on an assembly line. Thomas treated the process of printmaking, such as the prints made from plates produced in the 1930s for example, the same as making sculpture; he created the work, made the plates himself, pulled the prints himself, and signed and numbered the editions himself. Though they were multiples the number of impressions pulled (usually twenty or less) in each edition was truly

limited and every print varied because of Thomas' constant manipulation of the process, even the colors, from print to print.

There was very little Thomas did as an artist that he did not do himself. Though he did not employ live models, he frequently used members of his family as subject matter in his work such as *The Little Mother (Robin and the Doll)* and *the Portrait of Sara*. It was more than a matter of pride that he did not employ studio assistants. It was simply the ethic in his time: artists were responsible for making their own work.

The art world has changed dramatically in its approach to producing art since Thomas was a student at the Munich Academy. Since the late 1960s it seems undeniable that the laudable attempt to make the art world more accessible through the democratizing efforts of increased public educational program opportunities has also effected the marketing aspects of the art world as well, creating pressures that have required multiple production to keep up with the demands of an audience driven by advertising as opposed to an enlightened public in pursuit of quality.

From time to time several of the Expressionist artists worked in relative isolation, just as Thomas did for the many years he lived at Stone Mountain. Thomas' energy was legendary. A careful study of his work reveals the origination of the same or similar idea as other artists, obtained independently and often at about the same time. From the late 1930s through the mid-1950s modes of communication were far more limited. Fewer art publications existed. Television did not begin broadcasting until the late 1940s, with little if any arts-related programming. And prior to the enactment of the interstate highway system during the Eisenhower administration it was necessary to travel great distances and for long periods of time to see exhibitions which, only occasionally, were accompanied by the publication of a catalogue.

All this would seem to account for the enormous quantity of work Thomas produced over the years. It would not have been an unusual achievement for an Expressionist artist, especially an experimenter like Thomas who worked quickly, going from one idea and medium to another. There was nothing to rival the number and size of museum and gallery exhibitions now available to the public, nor the recent explosion in new technologies now used by museums, such as CD-ROM and video. Communication is instantaneous today.

Many times in conversation, and probably out of frustration, Thomas would emphasize his own perspective about the importance and necessity for art to be philosophical and interpretative. In his own mind it was not enough for an artist to be merely technically proficient. An artist was required to go beyond that; for Thomas art was a subtle combination of philosophy and craft that together transcended either one.

Ultimately, this book and exhibition would not have been possible without the artist himself, convinced of his own ideas, having driven himself to find a place of his own while spending over sixty productive years searching for something new, inspirational, philosophical, investigative, self-expressive and timeless -all things that come from the mind . . . and come from the heart. For that we owe our greatest debt and thanks to Steffen Thomas who, in Sara's words, "was ready to leave us" when he died quietly at the age of eighty-four on 27 January 1990.